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2003



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If you are a dreamer come in,
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
a hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer,
If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.

- Shel Silverstein

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recipe for a lesson in pursuit of tomorrow by Vicky Smith is this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for poetry.

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Naive Knew Better by Sebastian Phillip is this years recipient of the art award.

On The Cover: *Seperate is Bound* by Julian Santa-Rita.

Fiction

There's a Piano in the Creek

Sasha McBrayer

It is a pleasant day. Usually I hate how it feels out, but things are strangely mellow. I'm standing on a worn old country road. It has probably been here for a hundred years at least. Its been paved over several times since its first construction, but you can still feel the age. I feel it even more so since this street, for me, represents everything that is old. I'm standing in front of my grandmother's house. It has been my grandmother's house since my father was a boy. If I look behind me, I will see my great grandparent's house. It's here, too. And at one time my uncle lived across the field, but his second wife made him move so their fragile marriage wouldn't be so affected by his mother living ten yards away. It didn't matter much. He divorced her, then remarried her, then divorced her again. In total he has been divorced three times now between two women.

The sun is warm, but hidden enough behind fluffy, white clouds so as not to make me sweat overly much. I can feel the humidity on my face and on the back of my neck. I can feel it in my throat as I steadily breathe in the warm air. It isn't as bad as it

usually is, though. The cicadas are awake, filling my ears with their constant screeching. Though many things have changed since my childhood, cicadas still frighten me. Have you ever seen a cicada's shell? They are thick, hearty little insects, the size of a small walnut, who make an awful racket all summer and shed their skin. I've never seen a live cicada, but I have found their lifeless shells and each one gives me a chill.

The big white house behind me is exactly the same. There are new owners living there now who don't even know me. They don't know that I swam in their pool once, or that I ate dinner in their living room. They don't know that my grandma lives across from them or that my great grandparents live right next door. They don't realize that the little tomato garden only inches from their property is tended daily by my great grandpa and that I've eaten a few tomatoes from there. They also do not know that there's a girl standing in the road in front of their house planning to do some questionable things.

I cross the narrow street to stand on my grandmother's porch. There are cobwebs everywhere. This is nothing new. I think the biggest spider I ever saw had a web here one summer. The huge bushes gave her plenty of shade to hide in. There's an old porch swing that's always been here, too. I would sit in it and contemplate what it is I'm about to do, but it's covered with dust. And who knows, there might be a cicada or spider -- waiting there to get me.

As I examine the porch I see the mailbox where I've gotten some of my own mail. Yes, my parents and I called this home for a time, two separate instances. What kind of a grown man moves his family into his mother's house? I'll never know. . . I remember the first time we stayed here for more than just a visit. I was in third grade and everyone was beginning to think there was something wrong with me because I could not remember my address or telephone number. None of them had the slightest clue that it was no problem with my memory, but rather my will. I did not want to remember it. To remember it would mean it was true. This place. . . was my home.

My grandmother isn't home. I've made sure of that. Now is my chance. I MUST be insane, but all I feel is anger. If I don't do something about it, channel some of this negative energy, I'll just explode. I've never felt this way before. I have to do this.

I know exactly where my grandma hides the extra key. It has been in the same place since my dad was a boy. I have to stand on an old chair to reach it, but I get it, and I open the door. As I enter, so many memories hit me. It has only been five years since my last visit to this place, but suddenly it seems like it has been longer. I can remember my cousin chasing me around on this slick floor in his superman PJ's. I remember third grade, when I brought home tons of books for homework every night and my back hurt

from the weight of my book bag. God, I remember so much. I wonder if everyone has memories like mine. I wonder how many other little girls have been so wounded by family.

“The road to grandma’s house is never long.” That is what the plaque on the wall says. I’d prefer that it said, “Escape is futile; abandon all hope ye who enter here.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and move into the dark living room. It is just as I left it. The same couch with the same handmade throw sits in front of the same coffee table, holding her almost finished crossword puzzle. It never occurs to me that I’m breaking and entering. This is my grandmother’s house! There are photographs of me as a child all over this place. They were taken when I was cute. When it was all right for me to be chubby and shy. Before I needed things like money, and praise, and support, and a place to live. Finally, the object of my desire is within view. The huge wall piano doesn’t seem as big as it did when I was small and it was my favorite toy. It has never been tuned and is rarely dusted. I move to it and remove all of my grandmother’s picture frames and candle sticks from it.

I pause. I might as well listen to it one last time before forever silencing the old girl. I raise the cover. I remember how difficult it used to be for me to lift the heavy wooden cover and how afraid I was of catching my tiny fingers in it like the mouse traps my grandmother keeps in the basement.

I press a key. It's so loud. It startles me. I remember I could never play softly, no matter how hard I tried. I play. First I play Fur Elise. It's my favorite song for the piano. Then, I play El Shadai, a gospel song I taught myself. Finally, after a short pause, I play Heart and Soul. It is only fitting. This is where I learned it.

Despite the piano being out of tune, I'm pleased and I know it's time to go on with my mission. I pull the piano from where it has been for more years than I've been alive and I struggle to push it across the living room floor. I don't stop there. I turn the corner and push it right out the door and onto the porch. I stop only to lock the door and replace the key to its hiding place. Then I get to pushing again. I push it into the field where I used to catch lightning bugs. I push it into what used to be my uncle's yard and where he used to keep his killer dog, Stetson, who liked only me and used to eat the eggs I couldn't clean off my plate in the morning. Stetson was destructive and dangerous. He broke every chain they put around him and had the strength to push several pounds of bricks from his way. I loved Stetson and quickly became unafraid of him. I wish he could see me now. I push the old antique wall piano past where I used to catch the school bus and on down the downward sloping road.

By now it has momentum. I'm not doing much work at all. I point the thing into the path of the creek where my dad used to catch crayfish as a boy and I let it go. It felt so good. It felt so good

seeing that piano that was never mine fly into the rushing water and break. It made a loud sound but not at all like one in the cartoons.

My mission was over. They'd never know it had been me. I loved the piano best; save perhaps for my younger cousin Lauren who used to play when I was no longer the new, adorable, fascinating grandchild. But she had her own piano now. This would be the biggest scandal Raceland, Kentucky had ever seen, with its two stoplights and high school comprised of only three hallways and a cafeteria. Is that enough, though? Will my anger fade?

The Wisherman

Stephen Mosca

One bright morning, a young man was walking down the beach and wishing that he had a mate to share his day with. The waves broke to his side producing their perpetual rhythmic white noise, and the sunlight would occasionally catch drops of flying spray which would sparkle like shards of the purest leaded crystal, ablaze from within. As he strolled along he wandered rather close to the incoming surf such that, at its zenith, the thinning water would reach to the very edges of his bare feet before retreating to their own element, the great Mother Sea. While he was thinking about his loneliness and walking close to the cool surf, a fish suddenly leapt out of an incoming wave and onto the sand before his very path. Had he not noticed the beached creature by the thrashing motions it made he might have easily stepped over it and walked on, none the wiser. But he did see the fish, and he stopped dead in his tracks to gaze down upon it.

“Please, throw me back into the sea,” the fish implored, twisting itself to look up at the man. The young man, almost struck

dumb by this apparition, slowly stooped to pick up the fish in his hand and, straightening, examined it closely. He had never heard of a talking fish before, and this one looked no different from the countless others like it he had seen in the baskets of the village fishermen after a fruitful day with their nets.

“Please, throw me back into the sea,” the fish repeated, pleadingly.

“I would throw you back into the sea, but I have no one else for company and would like to have a companion with whom to pass the time. As you can speak, won’t you consider staying with me a while?” asked the young man as he regained his wits as well as his former pace.

“Oh, I could not do such a thing and keep my life,” replied the fish. “But I will offer you something in return for my release.”

“What can you offer?” asked the man, with a look of skepticism painted across his broad, tanned face.

“If you throw me back into the water right now, I will grant you three wishes,” claimed the fish, who was by now looking back and forth from the man’s face to the sea with a very thirsty and desperate expression on its scaly face. Seeing that the fish was in dire straits from being out of its element, the man figured he had little to lose and agreed, throwing the fish into the water with a careless toss, never breaking his slow but steady stride down the sun-drenched beach.

“Three wishes indeed!” the man said aloud to himself. “I wish

I would meet a woman instead of a talking fish.”

No sooner had he uttered this remark than an attractive woman came into his view, walking towards him over the sand in a direction that would carry her path over his at somewhat the same moment in time. The man blinked a few times, thinking he may have been imagining this sudden vision, but the woman kept approaching, becoming more real, and more beautiful, as they closed on each other with each successive step. She wore a light colored, sleeveless summer dress which, when blown back by the incoming sea breeze, pressed tightly against her body, revealing a shapely and athletic form. Her hair was long and black and was also blown carelessly by the wind, though, he thought, in a most fetching manner. Her face was beautiful to behold, her eyes large, green and sparkling, her skin supple and pure, her lips like ripe red fruit. She was bare footed and her legs were beautifully tapered and tan. Her gaze met his as they approached each other. The man was riveted as much by her beauty as by her sudden appearance before him. As he was stunned into silence, it seemed quite fortunate that it was she who spoke first.

“Hello.” Her voice was penetratingly clear and gentle at once. “Do you mind if I walk with you awhile? It’s a beautiful day and I would very much enjoy the company of someone to share it with.”

“Well, no, not at all. It would be my pleasure to have you join

me. I was just wishing for someone to enjoy the day with, myself.”

And so they walked and talked down the glittering sand until the sun set low and burnished the sky with ever deepening violet hues. In that time, it became abundantly clear that each so enjoyed the company of the other that, from that afternoon on, they spent all their future days together.

After a while, a certain routine developed in their lives. The man noticed that the woman had some very definite ideas about what the man should and should not be doing and had no trouble telling him so. It got so that, at one point, the man remembered how he had met this woman and secretly cursed that awful fish. Ah, the fish! He had forgotten all about it up till now but when he did remember it, he also remembered that he had wished to meet this woman, and just as the fish had promised, he had. So, again, figuring that he had nothing to lose, he turned towards the sea and said aloud: “Fish, if you’re able to hear me, I ask you for a second wish. I wish that my woman would not have her own opinions, but that she always accept mine as her own.”

He stood there for a long moment, feeling somewhat foolish. Then, with a shrug of resignation, he returned to the home they had made together. When he arrived, he did not find there what he had expected. Instead of his things placed neatly where the woman usually preferred them, they were scattered about haphazardly. When he searched for her near her sewing basket or out in the garden, she was not to be found. He looked all about and finally,

after wandering down to the old pier, found her drinking rum and telling bawdy tales at the old sailor's pub.

"What are you doing here?" he inquired of her with a tone of some surprise.

"I felt like having a drink or three and breathing the ocean breeze," she replied as naturally as if that is what she had always done. Thinking this not to be an entirely bad thing, the young man joined her and they drank and told stories with their new friends well into the next morning. From the fine stupor they had acquired, they proceeded to sleep in the warm, snug sand until the sun's morning rays met their closed eyelids. They awoke slowly, stretching out the kinks in their bones.

"What shall we eat for breakfast, my love?" the young man asked his mate.

"Oh, I don't care. Whatever you feel like having is fine with me."

So, the young man went about conjuring up an idea and then a plan and then had only to execute it, which he did, and soon they were eating a morning meal of crab meat and bread. The woman seemed happy enough just to be with him so that nothing else mattered to her and not a single complaint was heard, though he found the crab difficult to eat and the bread quite stale.

Well, it went on like this for some time. Every decision that had to be made, and there were many of them, was of no matter to the woman. Each and every decision, major and minor alike, was

deferred to what the man said he wanted. There came times when the man, for reasons of fatigue or disinterest or lack of preference, would find it quite bothersome to have to make each and every decision, but he knew that if he did not make one, one would simply not be made. So, as it happened, he found himself almost in the same condition as before, where he felt very much alone in the world, responsible for all that he did, plus all that his companion did as well. Eventually, this task became a burden upon him which seemed to grow in weight and dragged more heavily upon him with each passing day. It got so he no longer enjoyed the companionship of the woman, as there was nothing to her that he could contest. And because of the lack of mental discourse, there soon developed a lack of physical intercourse as well until any pleasure he once had from her was now only a distant and fading memory. His morose state caused him to lose interest in everything, even food, and so he seldom ate anymore and began to feel ill and began to look thin and pale.

One day, after having made all decisions big and small, and feeling like this difficult state of affairs would never cease to be, he remembered he had but one wish left from the fish. He considered his circumstances and gazed idly at his mate in a calculating manner. He construed there a being with no mind of her own and thus, to him, little value. That's it, then, one last decision; he would wish her gone, he thought. But before he did, he turned to his mate and asked her point blank:

“Do you think I should wish you away, and return to what I was before we came together?”

“I think you should do what you desire to do. If you care for me, do not wish it so, and if you no longer want me, then follow your own wish.”

Befuddled by this conundrum, the man sat and sulked and pondered.

“I wish I never saw that damn fish!” he thought to himself and then, in that very instant, he found himself walking along the beach on a beautiful sunny day, all alone, watching the sun catch the bursting sea spray and turning it into prisms of colorful light that would rain down around him in a most delightful way. He strayed closer to the edges of the foamy surf, and as he did a fish leapt out of the roiling waters and landed before his naked feet. So absorbed was he in watching the beautiful display of nature that he never noticed the frantic motions of the beached creature and didn’t realize that it had landed right beneath his very next footfall. As he pressed the fish into the sand with the entire weight of his body concentrated into that single stride, he was thinking only of how much he wished he had a companion with which to share such a glorious day.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Karen Harrell

I'm so tired and I hate riding the bus. I have gotten to the point that I don't look at anyone anymore; people's faces are melding together like melted taffy. Besides, there is no point to discerning friend or foe in a crowd of tired, hot, frustrated people.

The bus is late, as usual. I try to get a seat on the left side of the bus, towards the front. It's easier for me to see my stop coming up, especially when I forget my glasses. And, of course, I've forgotten them again. My trip is usually 45 minutes in normal traffic, but today the bus seems to stop like an elevator carrying a sadistic, button-mashing child. Hopefully no one will sit next to me, but I don't have that kind of luck.

The man who sits next to me looks familiar in the small glance I give him before turning back to count stops. I can feel him staring at me and my neck is crawling. I look over at him and smile my "I should know you but I don't" smile, in case he is someone from long ago. His face is still recognizable, almost

like someone I worked with or knew from long ago. I can smell his sweat, but it is clean and has an underlying scent I know from somewhere.

He is smiling back at me and he asks me about my day. I tell him it was fine and leave it at that. I find that I have a face that invites crazy strangers to talk to me, whether I want them to or not. I hate talking to people on the bus; the bus should be as silent as a library. I turn back to the window, so he gives up.

Finally my stop is here and I have to go through the excuse me dance that is inevitable when getting out of an inside seat. But, to my surprise, the man is also getting off at this stop. As I step down from the bus I notice that he is standing at the corner, almost like he is waiting for me. I ignore him and start my short walk home. I can't wait to sit down, crack open a beer, maybe read the paper. In the back of my mind I can hear his footsteps with me but not beside me. This feels like a trip I've been on before and for some reason I feel the need to look back at him. I still can't place his face, but his clothes are familiar. Maybe he's a regular customer from work; I may have sold him his shirt. Or maybe he's a new neighbor; I've been too preoccupied to notice anyone moving in on my street.

We reach a street that is hard to cross during traffic, so we stand next to each other waiting for a break in the parade of cars. His scent smells even more familiar, that mixture of fresh sweat and shaving cream. I finally figure out that familiar scent

from the bus, he uses the same laundry detergent I use. For some reason this makes me want to kiss him, hold him, feed him, anything to keep him near me.

We cross the street and he is walking beside me. He holds open the gate for me as I dig through my purse for the house keys. I need to tell him to leave, but something stops me. I turn to look at his face and that urge to kiss him comes over me again. He looks like he belongs here, like he has always been here. I start to cry when it hits me; he's my husband and I love him. He takes my hand and walks me to the door.

that's just chaos

Vicky Smith

The rain slapped like the wet rag of a bitter maid against the dirty window. He slouched in the dilapidated armchair, and behind him the dingy curtains slouched from a crooked metal bar. A cracked mug of something gelatinized on the coffee table nursing a broken leg. A cigarette burned its filter in a choked green ashtray. The smoke limped upwards to join the cloud writhing with dust mites just below the sagging tiled ceiling. It was mid afternoon, but who cares about such things as that?

The room was tiny and the hues of emesis and urine -- the walls and the furniture and the yellowing ceiling- cast a sickly air to the place. Everything was fading and he could only see black and white, by this point, after the years had staggered by with no hello or goodbye.

The same songs played over and over on his tiny alarm clock radio; the time was wrong by seasons but he didn't notice, or if he did sometimes by random acknowledgement he didn't give a damn anyway.

She'd left him years ago, taken the kid too, and he called this peace, because nothing moved but specks in the cigarette smoke. Even the mangy dog he named "dog" didn't limp around anymore; it'd died three days ago and he knew it wasn't just sleeping over there curled up and emaciated in the shadows of the corner, but he couldn't smell it yet and he was grateful it no longer stood by the door for hours, waiting for him to by chance let it outside.

He lived efficiently, except for his smoking habit; he had to make effort to keep up his supply but he sent for them over the mail, boxes at a time, and paid with moldy cash he kept stuffed in the seat of the armchair. He didn't bathe, he rarely ate, and he never moved unless he had to. He slept in his tired old armchair and only woke up by accident, when closing his eyes didn't make him go to sleep again after a while. Then he stared woodenly straight ahead and made a point not to see or think about anything until sleep took him again. He chewed on his fingernails until he had to eat or the discomfort of hunger would be more bothersome than walking to the stained and festering kitchen. He pissed in an old mason jar on the grimy tiled floor beside the armchair; he aimed from where he was and sometimes he missed and sometimes he didn't and he never cared much. He was old so he didn't shit too often; when he did he did it in the scratched metal dog bowl so he wouldn't have to feed it. Old age had taken his senses years ago so his only

discomforts were the occasional need to eat and those horrible moments when he started thinking again.

He used to be a poet; he used to be an artist; he used to be a father; he used to be a husband. He used to be many things but now he was just used up as he sat there passively and waited for time to come get him. It was only the rain that tried to get in.

He lived out there on Tick road, an old dirt road out in the woods of some forlorn county lapping up against civilization. He was forgotten except by his wife, who hated him—he'd beat her and then his son until they both curled up and lost consciousness in the corner. She tried to forget him but the belt he beat her across the face with left scars, and she'd broken many mirrors in her day but the image wouldn't break; it just fractured and threw up a distorted reflection in puddles and side mirrors when she forgot to not look. The son killed himself, hanged himself with his daddy's special belt he found by accident in his mama's old trunk when he was 23, and that was ten years ago. The son was a poet too; he had a red headed girl he knocked up when they were both too young and a green eyed daughter named Thyme. Neither had met the old man; the son had run away when he was 13, stole his daddy's pea green Chevy, knocked his mama unconscious while he cried and took her with him because by then she was too weak and beat to leave the old man—he'd saved her from being a prostitute all

her life and if he told her once, he'd told her a thousand times- she wasn't worth shit, a cheap whore like her deserved it, he'd paid 35 bucks to fuck her because she had such a pretty face beneath the cake makeup.

And so the son hit her with a pan wrapped in towels and took her with him— strapped a belt around her legs so she couldn't run back when she came to and wrapped her up warm and tight in a quilt, tucked her in the passenger seat and put the seat belt around her. He didn't know how to drive back then but desperation teaches many things on the fly -- he drove well and far and together they forgot everything but time and its mercy. That corner in his daddy's house had seemed like a grave and everyone knows graves are forever. But it wasn't, they never got over that, they spent every New Year's Eve together and cried with a joy that hurt when the ball fell on the black and white TV in her aluminum trailer. He was a good kid, he only drank on the weekends when he didn't have to work and loved his girl and his daughter. He never wore a belt; for ten years he never wore a belt and maybe the shock of seeing one in his hand again was what got him, reminded him who his daddy was and scared him so much he got hung up on it.

His girl cried every day for a few years and neglected Thyme, but she got over it and married some guy named Braun; they had a kid together, a boy, and the boy and Thyme never got along but that's just how kids are -- the boy didn't under-

stand where Thyme was coming from; she'd been the one to find her daddy swinging from leather and she had nightmares and woke up screaming, but her mama never came to soothe her. Braun wore a belt and he hit her with it when the boy pushed her and she feared him, and when it really hurt she wished she'd find Braun swinging from his belt and told her mama so. Her mama slapped her and cried all night.

Thyme got older and ran away when she was 13, like her dead daddy. She had tits and hips by then and she used them to get around and get what she needed -- she never sold her cunt but she always promised to, and that little lie got her where she wanted to go.

She wandered and was wild, got into writing poetry and drawing some on a pad she carried all the time with the nub of a pencil she took from a cheap motel. She worked her way into more obscure and forgotten places, and wandered into the woods one day to be alone and think about her daddy. The woods reminded her of him. As she walked a foul smell knocked her gagging to her knees.

Thyme was the one who found the old man, sitting and staring in his house of shit and decay. He saw her walk in, the old whore that had left him so many jaded years ago, and it got his mind going. He lunged for her, calling her an ungrateful whore in his dry cracked voice he hadn't used in years and trying to take off his belt with his weak old hands.

Thyme was a street girl and a little sensitive to being called a whore, because she never sold her cunt, only promised to. She carried a knife with her tucked up under her bra strap between her tits and as she gagged at his stench she stabbed him with it, right in his frail old chest.

Thyme got him all right, and she took his moldy cash too; a few years later she went to visit her grandma and told her about the pissy old man and her grandma called it chaos, that's just chaos -- they smoked cigarettes together and sat at her grandma's old red card table watching the black and white TV on the kitchen counter. It was New Year's Eve and they watched the ball drop and Thyme's grandma cried and said it was because she was so beautiful, Thyme was so beautiful.

Five Minutes

Bianca Bury-Rodriguez

Once upon a time, my parents thought that they were gonna die. When the Berlin Wall came down, they took their first sigh of relief. The Russkies had been defeated; we were no longer at war.

When September 11th happened, that opened up a new can of worms. I hadn't realized how big it was until my parents sat me down and told me all kinds of emergency plans.

"Heather, when you hear the explosion, you have five minutes."

Five minutes.

I was walking home from school, which is a good half-hour away, when I heard it. I had just crossed the point of no return. I had five minutes.

One-one-thousand-one, One-one-thousand-two, One-one-thousand-three.

I was running like a sonnuva bitch. My English book weighed me down, all of the authors in it (most of them dead) not giving a damn if I had to survive. Their words were already written down, they'd already survived.

One-one-thousand-ten, One-one-thousand-eleven.

I want to be a writer. I've been writing for at least five years now. My friends online think my stuff is really good. Some of them even know what I look like. As cheesy as it may sound, maybe I "will" survive.

One-one-thousand-thirty, One-one-thousand-thirty-one.

Nobody was coming outside. That was good and bad. Good because no one's enough of an idiot to make the mistake of coming outside and saying something incredibly stupid, like, "What's going on?" Bad because I couldn't run to the nearest house and get inside.

One-one-thousand-fifty, One-one-thousand-fifty-one,
Those al-Qaeda sons of bitches.

One-one-thousand-seventy, One-one-thousand-seventy-one, One-one-thousand-seventy-two, One-one-thousand-seventy-three.

They aren't Muslims. Hell, they aren't even human

One-one-thousand-ninety-five, One-one-thousand-ninety-six, One-one-thousand-ninety-seven.

Did you see the carnage on TV when the WTC fell?

One-one-thousand-one-twelve, the news footage showed people jumping from the 89th floor. Those sick sons of bitches.

One-one-thousand-one-three-one, One-one-thousand-one-three-two, One-one-thousand-one-three-three.

What's today? Is that gonna be another national holiday? 9/11 was bad. The news footage for the next week and then in 2003, was just bad taste.

One-one-thousand-one-five-nine, One-one-thousand-one-sixty.

The Reporters love the scent of dead bodies, don't they? They're all over homicides and tragedies like flies. Makes you wonder who is worse Al-Queda for thinking up this shit, or for the media to enjoy the ratings.

One-one-thousand-one-eight-nine, One-one-thousand-one-nine-oh.

Damn them, damn them, damn them. Why the hell are they doing this to me? I'm American, does that give them the fucking right to kill me? Just because I'm not all about Allah? I believe in God; they THINK they're following Allah. We should be on the same side, right?

One-one-thousand-two-oh-six.

God wouldn't want this, I sure as fuck don't.

One-one-thousand-two-three-one. One-one-thousand-two-three-two.

My legs hurt, my lungs hurt, my head hurts, and if I stop running, I'm sure my heart'll hurt. Stupid fuckers.

One-one-thousand-two-six-one.

I can see my house from here, but my legs want to give out. I slip in a pothole, and DAMN, it hurts, but I have to keep

going, because if I don't, I'm gonna die, and God, I don't
wanna die, I hate al-Qaeda, I hate running, I hate dirty bombs...

One-one-thousand-two-seven-one.

All I really, really hate is DYING!

One-one-thousand-two-eight-nine.

My house! I can make it, I can make it! My legs seem to
have gotten a second wind from somewhere, desperation. most
likely.

One-one-thousand-two-nine-one.

What's sixty times five? Three hundred? I can do it, I
can do it. Mom's car isn't there.

One-one-thousand-two-nine-two.

What The fuck? There's a cloud . . . a big, green one,
one-one-thousand-two-nine-seven.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! It's not nerve gas! I
don't care what color Dad said nerve gas was, that sure as Fuck
isn't it!

One-one-thousand-two-nine-eight.

My limbs are seizing up. My hand's on the doorknob.
DAMN.

One-one-thousand-three-hundred.

I love you Mom.

Don't Tell Mommy

Amy Limpert

Nicole was supposed to be in her room getting dressed. She really did not want to give her mother anything else to worry about, but she had to scratch. Her entire body was itching. No matter how much or how hard she scratched, it still yearned for just a little more. Nicole tilted her head listening to her mother's shoes as they came clicking down the hallway.

"Pumpkin, are you dressed?" Jean shouted, as she approached her daughter's room. "I need to fix your hair and we have to leave shortly!"

"Why aren't you dressed?" Jean frantically said. "It's ten after nine and we have to leave the house in fifteen minutes. We cannot be late! I told you over and over how important this day is to me." As Jean was hollering, she noticed Nicole clawing her nails up and down her arms.

“Nicole, come over here,” Jean said as she began to examine the red bumps that had mysteriously appeared on her daughter overnight.

“I put my dress on, and then I had to take it off because I felt itchy everywhere. I have been scratching and scratching, but they just won’t stop.” Nicole moaned. “Did those bed bugs bite me? Why are there red spots? Am I sick? How come they won’t stop itching? What do...?”

“Nicole! It’s all right. It’s not from the bed bugs, and you’re not sick. It looks to me like you have hives.”

“Hives? Like Grandpa’s bee’ hives? How did...”

“No sweetheart, not bee’ hives,” Jean chuckled. “Hives are the name of the bumps that you have. You must have had an allergic reaction to something. The bumps will go away in a couple of days. I have some cream in my medicine cabinet. We can put some ointment on them, and then they won’t itch as much. I’ll be right back.”

Nicole sat on her bed, and looked up toward the ceiling where her white four- poster bed used to connect to a canopy. She had really liked having a canopy bed. When her mom brought home the new bed, she told Nicole that the man from the store said that it was a genuine princess bed. Right now, however, it didn’t seem like a princess bed.

A few weeks ago, Nicole had been standing on her bed and thought that she could swing from bar to bar the way she did on the monkey bars on the playground at school. Her mom was pretty mad especially because she had ripped the towel bar out of the bathroom wall only days before, while trying to swing from the bathtub to the toilet.

“When are you going to stop swinging on everything?” Jean yelled. “This house is not a jungle gym!”

Nicole was not able to give her mother an answer. Since discovering that she could swing out into the bathroom by throwing a towel up over the shower rod, Nicole had dedicated a lot of time in finding other things she could swing on. Sadly, her pretty white eyelet canopy came crashing down when the first plastic support rod burst from her weight.

After a few moments of reminiscing over how her now destroyed princess bed came to its present state, Nicole heard the clacking of her mother’s shoes getting louder as the sound approached her bedroom.

“Are you nervous about the wedding?” Jean said softly, as she sat down next to Nicole on the bed.

“No, I just want to make sure that I do a good job.” Nicole smiled as she looked up at her mother. “Mom, you look really, really pretty.”

“Thank-you, Pumpkin. “If you are nervous, it’s O.K. You can tell me and we can talk about it. I know that it is a big step for both of us, but we’ll help each other through it, right?”

She smiled, nodded her head in agreement, and reached her arms up to give her mom a hug.

Jean was driving her 82’ black Capri faster than usual, trying to get to her wedding on time. The radio played softly in the background. Nicole sat buckled up in the back seat looking out the window. Jean was always just a few minutes behind schedule, so naturally that meant Nicole was late for most everything. Nicole often ate her breakfast in the car as Jean raced to get her to school on time. She didn’t mind being late that much, because going fast meant she would be able to feel the road bumps really good.

Jean reached for the dial on the radio and a man’s voice roared out.

“Trapper Jack is back. It’s 9:35 am, and you guys better get off your seat and move your feet. This gorgeous sunny morning won’t be here for long. There’s a eighty percent chance of heavy rain and thunderstorms. A ten set music sweep after the break.”

“Oh no, I hope the rain holds off until after the wedding,” Jean wailed.

“Why? I love the rain. It’s so much fun. When it rains at Grandma’s house, I put on my bathing suit, go outside, and dance on the driveway.”

“Well, that does sound like fun, but it is supposed to be really bad luck if it rains on your wedding day,” Jean wailed, her howl in unison with that of the tire screech as she made a sharp turn into the parking lot.

Grabbing Nicole’s hand, Jean quickly walked toward the center of a little park where a white wood Victorian gazebo held her family, a pastor, and Tony.

“Mom, I’m starting to itch again,” she said, bending down to run her chewed fingernails forcefully up and down her legs.

“Today is very important to mommy. Please do everything just like we practiced. We will not be here long. Afterwards, you can take off your dress and we can add more cream. You’ll be fine, O.K.” Jean again took hold of her daughter’s hand and led her towards the ceremony.

Standing in the gazebo, Tony and Jean exchanged their wedding vows. To Jean’s right side stood her daughter. As the flower girl, she was the only member of the wedding party. It was a very small wedding. Nicole held herself still, closed her eyes and tried everything she could think of not to scratch. The

long sheer sleeve dress with it's ruffled neck and matching tights that she had been forced to wear made her itch even more. Hoping the dress would help out and do a little of the work, she began to move from side to side, arching her shoulders back and forth. No luck! She lifted her tiny patent leather shoe and ran it down the shin of her other leg. Oh, that felt so good! As she quickly switched her flower basket from one hand to the other in an effort to itch, several of the flowers tumbled out onto the floor. Jean flashed her a warning glance. Nicole looked from her mother to Tony, who shook his head as if to say "No more!"

"It's almost over, honey," Grandma whispered in her ear. "You can be a big girl and wait just a few more minutes for mommy to finish."

Nicole stood still for mommy.

Trying hard to forget the perpetual itching, Nicole let her mind wander back to the first time she had met Tony. She had been in her room having a tea party with her two best friends Allie and Jack. The three friends had just invited Mr. Toad, the bee, and Big Bunny to join them, when Jean came in and asked if they could talk.

"Nicole, I have a very special friend of mine that I would like you to meet. His name is Tony. He is very nice, and

is excited to meet you! We are going to meet him tomorrow night at 7 o'clock for dinner. How does that sound?"

"O.K. Where are we going? Can we go to Chucky Cheese?"

"No, we are going to a nice restaurant. You and I can go to Chucky Cheese another time."

"Can Jack and Allie come too? Please! Can they? Pleeceeeeeease!"

"We'll see," said Jean letting a little laugh escape. "I'll ask Tony if he minds if we have another two join us."

As it turned out, Tony picked an especially nice restaurant for dinner. The Flight Deck, rated among the city's top five places to dine, was located directly across the street from an airport. Using the location to its advantage, the restaurant had incorporated several headsets that would allow the patrons to listen to the conversations in the control tower.

Jack spilled grape juice all over Allie's dress, so Jean and Nicole arrived a little later than expected. The hostess led them to a table near one of the stone fireplaces where Tony sat waiting for the remainder of his party. He immediately presented Jean with a bouquet of flowers and gave Nicole a music box. Tony reached across the table and cupped Nicole's little hand in his, as he introduced himself.

“It is so nice to finally meet you, Nicole. I have heard wonderful things about you, but you’re even prettier than the picture your mom showed me.”

Nicole smiled and thanked Tony for his present. She looked at the silver design that was engraved on the surface of the little piano. She loved music boxes. In fact, she already had a small collection started. After she had fully inspected her new treasure, Nicole politely introduced Tony to her two guests. Tony quickly shook both of their hands. Without speaking to either Jack or Allie, Tony picked up his menu.

After dinner, Nicole, Allie and Jack sat in Jean’s car. They could see Jean standing outside talking to Tony.

“So what do you guys think of him?” Nicole said. “I think he’s real nice. I like my music box. Do you want to guess what song it plays?” Nicole tipped the music box over so they could try to identify the tune.

“I don’t know. I didn’t like how he tried to order for everyone. He seems sort of bossy,” Allie said as she looked out the window at Jean.

“I didn’t want to eat my potato. I only like mashed potatoes,” Jack exclaimed as he shrugged his shoulders.

Nicole became quiet and stared at her mother. She then focused her eyes on the pleats of her royal blue velvet dress. Quickly shaking her head, she turned toward her friends.

“She liked those flowers!” Nicole said convincingly.

The memory of that first meeting faded as the wedding ceremony finally came to an end. Nicole rode with her grandparents back to their house. A reception had been planned to take place in their backyard. However, the celebration ended abruptly in the early afternoon when the predicted thunderstorms poured down on the outside festivities.

Against the wishes of his bride and family, Tony cursed the rain and remained outside cleaning up. Once inside the house, Nicole went to the window that overlooks the backyard and watched Tony as he slammed down one plate on top of another.

Nicole spent the next week with her grandparents, while her mother and Tony went to Hawaii for their honeymoon. Jean was right. Nicole’s hives disappeared in days, so it made her visit much more pleasant. She loved spending time with her grandparents. They helped Jean raise her because Nicole’s parents had divorced before she was a year old.

Nicole went to Apple Falls Elementary, which was right down the road from her grandparent’s house. She walked to their house everyday after school, and stayed until Jean picked her up after work.

That week, Grandma made Nicole her favorite lunch, a grilled cheese sandwich, a pickle on the side, milk with straw-

berry Quick and iced animal crackers for dessert. Grandpa took her fishing that week as well. Grandma and Grandpa liked Allie and Jack, so Nicole was able to play with them often. They went on several bike rides, played on the swings, and had a tea party. Jack complained about having a tea party, but after Grandma gave him cookies with his tea he didn't mind so much.

After the honeymoon, Tony began moving his things into the apartment. He didn't have many boxes, so it did not take long. Grandpa offered to help Tony move the boxes with his truck, but Tony said he and Jean could move the boxes themselves.

The daily routine quickly resumed itself. Nicole was allowed to watch her shows before she went to sleep. Bedtime consisted of a tuck in, a story, a kiss, and on very special nights a song. There were times that even after Nicole was supposed to be asleep, she would creep into the living room and complain of insomnia, stomach pains, or hunger. Sometimes, she just wanted her mommy to come and lay down beside her for a little while. Tony always offered his advice during these events.

"When are you coming out? It is past her bedtime. If you let her be, she'll go to sleep on her own." Tony would stand in the doorway and watch until Jean got up. Sometimes, Jean would tell Tony to go and wait for her in the living room.

However, Tony refused to leave, so eventually Jean would give Nicole a kiss and a hug, then walk out of the room. Nicole did not understand this. Her mom had always stayed with her before.

“Why does Tony make mommy go away?” Nicole asked Jack and Allie. “She used to lay in bed with me all the time.”

“Maybe Tony wants to steal your mommy!” Jack yelled at Nicole. His eyes got very big as he thought about what he had said. Jack sometimes jumped to conclusions.

“What do you think, Allie? Do you think that Tony is trying to steal my mom from me?”

Nicole let her head hang. She let out a long sigh, allowing her bottom lip to poke out just a bit. Her lips began to quiver. A burning sensation formed in her eyes as she fought the tears from coming. Allie, seeing how upset Nicole was, gently stroked her head.

“Nicole, I don’t think that Tony is trying to steal your mom. Your mommy loves you. She would never leave you. Not for anything!” Allie said very slowly and calmly. Allie and Jack looked at each other, then back at Nicole.

After living in the apartment for several weeks, Tony attempted to dictate all of the household activities. Tony complained if his wife went out without him. Jean’s family and

friends did not call or visit as much anymore. She did not seem to do anything unless it included Tony. Nicole avoided Tony. She tried to spend as much time as she could with Jack and Allie. Nicole was afraid to play with Jack and Allie near Tony because there had been a few occasions when Tony had been mean to them. One day, while the three of them were sitting on the floor playing, Tony walked by and stepped on Jack's foot. Jean saw him do it.

"Sorry," he said. "It was an accident."

One evening, Nicole was lying on the couch watching the television and waiting for her dinner, when Tony walked in through the front door and spoke to her.

"Children should speak to an adult when they see them!" Nicole did not know what to say, so she nodded her head and pulled the blanket up almost to her eyes.

The next evening, Nicole was again in the living room when Tony arrived at home.

"Hi Tony!" she stammered, giving a little smile and a wave.

"Nicole, children should say more than 'hi' to an adult. A child should be polite, look at the adult, say hello, and ask them how they are doing."

“O.K. I’ll do it right next time.”

Nicole was nervous, so she practiced the whole next day what she would say to Tony when he came home. Tony walked through the door. She knew he was coming. She had been listening and waiting.

“Hello Tony! How are you doing?”

Tony stared down at Nicole. Then he slowly smiled. She nervously smiled back at him. “Nicole, children should be seen and not heard.”

Nicole sat looking at Tony. She didn’t know what to say. Her eyes started to well up with tears. She pulled the blanket over her head and softly cried. She pretended that she was watching the television, but she knew that he could hear her crying. That night when she was in bed she could hear Tony and her mom arguing. Even though she had crept off her bed and over to the bedroom door, she could not understand what they were saying.

Nicole told Jack and Allie about what had happened. They both gave her a big hug and told her that everything would be all right.

“Did you tell your mom what Tony said?” Allie asked.

“She was in the kitchen making dinner. I think she

heard him," Nicole answered, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Her nightmares woke her up several times throughout the night.

"Nicole, maybe Tony is trying to be a good daddy."

Jack said, lifting his eyebrows and his hands in agreement.

Nicole really did not know what a good daddy was supposed to be like. The only father she had ever known was her grandfather and Tony was nothing like him. She listened to Jack's advice and tried very hard to be good, but it seemed that Tony disliked the way she did most anything.

Soon, the Thanksgiving holiday came around. Dinner was always at Grandma and Grandpa's house, as was every other holiday meal. Being the only child at these family functions, Nicole received most of the attention. She liked that part. Her family seemed to really like Tony. He complimented the fabulous smells from Grandma's cooking. He talked with grandpa about politics. He joined the pre-toast in which he sipped on grandpa's favorite drink, Crown and ginger. However, every time Nicole looked at Tony, he seemed to be inspecting her and scrutinizing all of her actions.

Thanksgiving dinner was wonderful, as always. Everyone had eaten so much food that it was hard to move. By the smiles, the compliments, and the continuing sighs that were

It was fairly late in the evening by the time the pumpkin pie was finished. Nicole needed to be in bed at a reasonable hour so Jean asked Tony if he could take her home. Jean wanted to stay and help clean up the remnants of their feast. Tony glanced over at Nicole, and glared his eyes at her. Then he turned back to Jean and smiled..

searching for some relief, it appeared that everyone was happy.

“It would be my pleasure. Nicole, are you ready to go home?”

“No! I don’t want to go. I want to stay. Please! I’ll help clean up. Please!”

“Jean, Nicole can spend the night here. That way she can go and get in bed right now,” Grandma said.

“No. She does not always have to get her way,” Jean snapped.

“Nicole, I want you to go home with Tony and get right into bed.” Jean bent down and kissed her daughter on the head. “I will be home shortly and promise to check on you.”

Tony thanked Jean’s family for their hospitality. Nicole again announced to the room that she wanted to stay, but Jean refused to budge on this issue. It was late.

Nicole threw herself down on the floor and started yelling. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay. Grandma, please

let me stay with you.” Her face turned red, as she gasped for air in between her sobs. “Pleeeeeease, let me staaaaaaaay. Pleeeeeeeeeease!” She continued to scream, “I...I...don’t want to goooooooooo. Pleeeeeease, let me stay!”

However, in the end, she had no choice but to leave with Tony.

Tony and Nicole rode through the curves and turns in darkness and silence. She could see Tony watching her in the rear-view mirror.

“Nicole, you were a very bad girl today. Your mom and your grandparents were very disappointed in your behavior. What are we going to do about this?”

“No! That’s not true. I was good.”

Nicole began to pick and bite at her nails. She got very quiet, and looked out the window, studying every house on the road as they passed by.

Nicole followed behind Tony as they walked up to their apartment building. Tony used his key to unlock the front security door. They walked down the hall. The heavy metal door collided with its frame and closed. The sound echoed through the hallway. Tony opened the door to their apartment and let Nicole walk in front of him into the dark apartment. She hesitated in the light of the hallway, but he told her to go inside.

Tony made her stand alone in the total blackness before he stepped inside and turned on a light.

“Nicole, go and get ready for bed. I will come in a few minutes.”

“You don’t need to tuck me in,” Nicole said quickly.

“Mom said that she’ll do it when she comes home.”

“Nicole, I am not coming to tuck you in. Your earlier behavior needs to be dealt with. I will be in once I decide in what manner that will be done.”

Nicole went into her bedroom and changed into her pajamas. As she was about to get into bed Tony came into her bedroom.

“Nicole, you acted terrible at your grandparent’s house. You were very bad. Everyone, your aunt and uncles, your grandparents, your mother and I, talked about how awful you were. You have to be taught a lesson so that you will learn how to behave. Your family does not want to be around you when you misbehave.”

Nicole straightened her body, crossed her arms defiantly over her chest, and scrunched up her face.

“I was not bad. My family does want me to be with them. If I wasn’t a good girl, mom would have told me.”

“Nicole, you were bad, very bad, and you will be punished. I want you to lie on your stomach and pull down your pajama bottoms.”

Nicole felt her whole body begin to tremble. Her mouth became very dry. Her stomach became queasy. Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest. She wished her mother would come home. She sat frozen, unable to move.

“Nicole! Are you being bad right now?” Tony shouted. “I think I told you to do something. Now be good, and do what I told you to do!”

Nicole crouched her head. She focused her eyes on her little stuffed bee that was lying on her pillows. Slowly she crawled off her bed.

Tony took off his leather belt and folded it in the palm of his hand. He raised it up in the air. CRACK! Tony lashed the belt hard across Nicole’s backside. Nicole screamed out in pain.

“Nicole, I am going to hit you seven times for each person that you misbehaved in front of today. Maybe this will help you remember to act like a good little girl.”

His voice sounded very strange to her. It was louder and more rushed than usual. Tears streamed down her face. She screamed out for her mother when words escaped through the sobs.

Tony did not apply the promised amount of punishment. He told Nicole that he was going to stop because her mother had asked him to have the punishment over with by the time she got home. However, Nicole did not know the difference. In her mind, she would remember the number seven.

Tony slowly wound his belt back through his belt loops. He checked his watch and glanced over at Nicole. She was humped over in a swell of pain and confusion. Her pajamas were soaking wet from her tears.

"Nicole!...Nicole!" Tony yelled. "I want you to end this crying right now and get into bed."

Choking on her tears, Nicole allowed her body to unfold from its crumpled position. She slowly pulled back the covers and crawled in. Tony turned off the light and sat at the edge of her bed.

"Nicole, you made me do what I did tonight," Tony said softly. "If you are a good girl from now on this will not happen again. If you tell anyone about this, you will not be able to live here anymore. Your mother will not want you, just like your father did not want you. She does not want a bad little girl. Your mother will be home soon, and I want you to be asleep before she gets home."

Nicole continued to cry, choking on her tears. She slid her whole body down the bed underneath the covers and cried softly for a long time. She could tell that Tony was still there. Finally, he got up and walked slowly out of her room.

Some time later, the front door opened and she heard her mother's voice.

"So how did everything go with Nicole? Is she in bed?"

"Everything went fine."

Nicole heard her mother coming towards her room. She was still curled up in a tight ball facing the wall, with the blankets pulled up over her head. Jean tiptoed beside the bed. Under the covers, Nicole's eyes were wide open.

"Nicole, what are you going to do? You have to tell your mom!" Allie screamed.

"If you don't tell her, then I'm going to!" Jack added rebelliously and started to march toward the door of Nicole's bedroom.

"No you can't tell. If you do, she will think I'm bad. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. No one can tell." Nicole looked both of her friends in the eye. "You have to promise that you won't tell."

Jack and Allie promised, but they were afraid for Nicole. They wanted to help, but they didn't know what to do. They wanted to tell, but what if Tony was right. What if Nicole's mother really didn't want her? Jack and Allie always thought Nicole was a good girl, but what if she wasn't?

Over the next few weeks, Nicole's disposition began to decline. She was not her usual happy self. She did not have much to say over dinner. Tony, however, chattered away. Nicole did not watch any television. The only thing that made her happy was to play with Jack and Allie. She did not ask her mother to sing for her, or to lie in bed with her. Jean kept asking her if she felt all right and feeling her forehead for any signs of a temperature.

One night, after Nicole had gone to bed, Jean decided to wash some clothes. She sorted the dirty clothes, and quickly hurried to the building's community laundry room. Nicole was awake, lying in bed. She had heard the front door close.

A few moments later, Tony came into her room. He sat at the foot of her bed as he had been doing whenever such an opportunity arose.

"Nicole, you're not asleep are you?" Tony asked quietly. "Your mother and I were talking and she still thinks that you're

a bad little girl. Everyone can see what a rotten little brat you are.” He hissed. “Nicole, your mommy doesn’t love you any more. She doesn’t want you. Nobody wants you.”

Nicole began to cry, as she always did when he said these things to her. She believed everything that Tony told her. He knew she told Jack and Allie all of her secrets. He told her that he hated them and, if she didn’t stop telling them things he was going to hurt them. The front door opened, and Tony quietly slipped out of the room.

In the last few months, Nicole’s teachers had phoned Jean several times concerned with Nicole’s declining behavior. Her attention was not focused on class related materials. Nicole’s teacher, Ms. Pearson, had phoned Jean again because Nicole had kicked a boy at recess when he refused to give her the ball. Then she had ripped a handful of hair out of a fellow classmate’s head because he had used some of her art supplies.

That evening when they got home, Jean questioned Nicole about her behavior at school. Tony involved himself in the discussion by adding that Nicole should be punished. Jean became very angry with Nicole when she refused to look at her, let alone provide some reason for her unruly behavior. Nicole was spanked. That was one of very few times that Jean had ever hit her daughter.

A few weeks after the spanking, Jean picked Nicole up from school. Nicole was surprised to see her mom at the school because she should have been at work. They came home, and Nicole went straight into her room. After being home for some time, Jean peeked into Nicole's room. Nicole knew her mother was there, but she did not look up. Nicole was playing with Jack and Allie. Finally, Nicole looked up and locked eyes with her mother, then quickly looked away. Jean came into the room and sat down in front of Nicole.

"Nicole, Tony is not going to live with us anymore. He left and is never coming back." Nicole began fidgeting with her skirt and looked up at her mother. She looked deep into her mother's eyes, searching to find out if this was a trick. Unable to find an answer, she focused all her attention on the plaid pattern of her skirt.

"Nicole, was Tony ever mean to you?"

Nicole began folding her skirt into little triangle pieces.

"Did Tony ever touch you in the wrong way?" Jean's voice began to get shaky.

"Nicole! Answer me! Did Tony ever do anything to you?"

"I'm not supposed to tell," Nicole whispered, still folding and unfolding the corners of her skirt.

"Nicole..." Jean's voice quieted. She leaned over and held up Nicole's chin so she could see her eyes. "Whatever you tell me will be all right. I will not be angry with you." Jean ran her fingers gently through Nicole's hair, "I love you so much, sweetheart. You can tell me."

Nicole pulled away and sat motionless. Every muscle tensed up as she desperately tried not to blink her eyes. She tried to hold back the tears, but the emotion was uncontrollable and she burst into tears. Jean reached over and began to stroke Nicole's hair again. Nicole threw herself onto her mother's lap and buried her head under her arm for a long time. Jean continued to run her fingers through Nicole's hair in a slow, calming motion.

As she lay on Jean's lap crying, she told her mother all the horrible things Tony said to her. She told her about the belt. Nicole told Jean that one day, she, Ali and Jack were playing in her room and were talking into a tape recorder. They were making up a story and they wanted to hear what their voices sounded like.

"You went somewhere and Tony came in to my room. He started telling me all those bad things. Later, we were listening to our story and the part came on when Tony came

into my room. I didn't mean to have him on there, but when he came I got scared and forgot that it was on."

"Nicole, do you still have that tape?"

"Uh-huh. Our story about Gus the mouse is on there, too."

Jean played her daughter's tape. She sat motionless, her mouth hanging open, her right hand placed on her forehead. Nicole could feel her mother's tears as they fell and rolled down onto her face.

They hugged for along time, neither one speaking a word.

"Pumpkin, I am so sorry. Don't believe that for a minute. I love you more than anything in this world," Jean sobbed as she wiped her eyes. "I will love you forever. Nothing will change that. I know how scared you must have been. I just wish you had told someone. If only I had known," Jean said as tears endlessly flowed down her cheeks.

"Mommy, I did tell."

"Who?" Jean jerked upright and searched Nicole's face for an answer.

"I told Jack and Allie. They told me to tell you, but I was too afraid."

Jean looked over at Jack and Allie. They sat side by side, their button eyes gazing straight ahead.

Faith Under Fire

Stephen Mosca

My father had a younger sister named Delores, but everyone called her Dee. When I was a kid, Aunt Dee was an incredibly important influence in my life. Although she was clearly an adult, she was also kind of like a kid. She was the one who bought the first Beatles records I ever heard and let my brother and sister and I listen to them in her apartment until we sang and danced ourselves ragged. She even went to go see the Beatles in person at Shea stadium in 1964, even though she was in her thirties at the time. I loved Aunt Dee. Dee knew how to have fun like few other adults I knew.

Dee was very involved in her church. My mom was basically a “verbal” Catholic; she talked a good game and sang in the choir at “Our Lady of Mt. Carmel” church where we would sporadically attend services, but other than that we didn’t think about or discuss religion much. Dee was the only one I knew who was both seriously involved with the church and happy in the sense that she didn’t automatically associate her

religion with guilt. In fact, she was always happy and seemed quite guiltless even while being devout. This was a rare and refreshing combination.

Aunt Dee never married and I faintly recall some talk that she had been so serious about the church at one time that she had considered joining the order and becoming a nun. But she never proselytized in the slightest degree, at least not to me. She was just a fun, happy person with a great sense of humor whom I could always count on to be fair and mature and playful and sometimes even a little bit mischievous, all at the same time.

The years went by and I became an adult myself. Due to the nature of my work I had to move away from my home town. Aunt Dee had since retired from her job working for a local attorney and had begun to travel around quite a bit with a girlfriend that she knew from church named Mary Massi. They had known each other for as long as I could remember. I recall seeing Mary Massi when my aunt would sometimes take us to church (and then to the diner afterwards for tea and english muffins with jelly and butter) and Mary would always fuss over how big and good looking we were becoming and pinch our cheeks, pulling the flesh of our faces as if to try to have a piece of us for her own.

Dee and Mary began traveling together and I at learned from my sister that what they were doing, that the motive behind the trips and the places that they chose to visit, was

religious in nature. They were visiting all the places in the world where it was claimed a miracle had either once occurred or was presently occurring. Apparently, there is no shortage of such claims and they were traveling the globe checking each one out personally in the order of how genuine they felt the claim to be. At one point they journeyed to a small town in Romania to see a statue of the virgin Mary in some women's basement that was claimed to be crying real tears. This particular statue had been pretty notorious among the faithful at the time and so Aunt Dee and Mary made the arduous trip immediately so that their chances of actually witnessing the miracle would be favorable.

I happened to be in New York for a weekend not long after Aunt Dee's return and had called my sister to see if she wanted to get together and have dinner while I was in town. She said that, coincidentally, she was supposed to have dinner with Aunt Dee that Saturday night and that I should come along as well. It would be the first time the three of us would be together in years, and who knew how long it would be until we all managed to get together again in the future and so I immediately agreed.

Saturday night came and at the appointed time we all met at a Red Lobster restaurant on Central Avenue in Yonkers. My sister and I, who saw each other and spoke fairly frequently by phone, had just gotten our greetings out of the way when Aunt

Dee came in. She was the same as ever. Short dark hair, big warm smile, her beaming personality exuding life and optimism. She was, as always, simply but fashionably attired, happy and energetic. She greeted us with warmth and affection as if we were still the small children who sheltered beneath her umbrella of unconditional love during our most trying of times. After we were seated and had ordered some appetizers, we began to discuss what each of us had been up to since we were all together last.

My sister graduated college and traveled to England for a while. She now worked for a large brokerage firm in Manhattan as a systems analyst and had become a Vice President of her department. I had taken a job as a consultant with a large defense contractor and was working in San Diego, living on the beach and driving a Corvette. Aunt Dee was typically expressive in her amazement at the paths of our lives and made us feel quite proud of ourselves in the telling of our own, perhaps otherwise taken for granted, accomplishments, which is just what Aunt Dee could always be counted on to do. We then asked her what she had been up to in the last several years and she began to tell us of the literally miraculous places she had been and the people she had met. Soon the story progressed to the weeping Madonna in Romania.

“Mary Massi and I went to Romania where there’s a statue of the virgin Mary who cries real tears,” she told us eagerly and in all sincerity.

"What do you mean?" I asked. My sister looked on knowing that I, always the skeptic, could be relied upon to ask more than enough questions for the both of us and so she need only sit and listen for most of her own questions to eventually be asked and answered.

"Well," Dee went on, "there's this statue of the Madonna and the woman who has it got it from a church that was destroyed during the war, a church where some saints are buried. She rescued this statue and put her in the basement of her house and built a small altar around it and one day she noticed what looked like tears running down from the eyes of the statue."

"Hmmm," my sister murmured.

"Maybe it's just condensation," I offered gently.

"A lot of people thought the same thing and they all have tried to figure out a reason why a statue would weep. They had it x-rayed and examined by scientists but no one can figure out a reason for this to happen. And it only happens sometimes. But they're real tears, they even taste salty."

Obviously, Dee was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt and she marveled at the implications this held for her beliefs. How wonderful, I thought to myself, that it is true enough for Dee to get some real peace from believing it. But I was young, and a newly trained engineer who was becoming practiced at searching for rational explanations for unexplained events, and I couldn't resist trying to see if I could uncover any logic in this apparent apparition.

“Why would a statue in a basement in Romania be the one that the Madonna would choose to personify herself?” I asked. “Why not the one in St. Patrick’s Cathedral downtown, or in the Vatican, or even all statues of the Madonna everywhere at once?”

“I don’t know, Stevie, but this is real. Mary Massi and I saw it for ourselves.” Aunt Dee’s voice was full of enthusiasm and very sincere. She was getting excited in recalling the trip and her time with the statue, with the throngs of believers pressing together into a single, throbbing human mass, their combined energy directed towards this symbol of ultimate hope. This living statue was an acknowledgement of, and actual contact with, their difficult and often cruel earthbound lives.

“There are thousands of people who travel to see this virgin, to pray and to touch her tears. Both Mary and I have a piece of holy cloth that was used to dry the tears. Here, I have it right here.”

As Dee began rummaging around in her pocketbook my sister and I exchanged a furtive glance. Not that we thought our dear Aunt was going off her nut or anything, but it was a little bizarre to be sitting in a Red Lobster in Yonkers while someone we knew and loved dearly was looking through her purse for piece of cloth she was certain had been blessed with the actual tears cried by the Virgin Mary for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ himself, as manifest in a stone figurine in some

obscure Romanian basement. All we could see of Dee for a while was the top of her head, her black hair hanging down obscuring her features, her arms working furiously, searching the contents of the bag on her lap when suddenly, with a triumphant flourish, she straightened up and held forth the object of her search: Among the rosaries and Mass cards there was a plastic packet with a small square of what looked to be a slightly smudged piece of white cotton cloth, about an inch square, its edges slightly frayed, which she extracted from its pouch and held gingerly by one corner in front of herself for us to behold. We gazed at the small artifact for several moments, cocking our heads this way and that, wondering exactly what we should be seeing or thinking or saying at being presented with something supposedly as holy and sacred as this miraculous shred of fabric but seeing only a small, rather unremarkable piece of what was perhaps only garden variety Romanian linen. Dee was fingering it lightly between her thumb and forefinger and gazing between it and us as if all doubts had now been laid to rest.

My sister sat there politely, peering at the item before her, and may have reached out and touched it herself, if only for a moment. Her expression was one of approval, encouraging Dee's already formulated opinion, offering no counterpoint. I, on the other hand, decided to pursue the subject just a tad further.

“So, you’re telling me that this cloth has the tears of the virgin Mary on it?” I asked.

“Yup,” Dee replied, rather blissfully. “It’s blessed cloth, Stevie. Holy. Nothing can harm it and it brings me good fortune and protects as long as I carry it with me.”

Rats! An absolute claim had been made. I should have disregarded it, but it just wasn’t in me to do so. I was still very much a certain type of cynic; alert to my definition of words but ignorant of their value as used by others. Her metaphysical claim had engaged a side of my personality that perhaps would better have been left at home that particular evening. With as much zeal as insensitivity, I pressed the issue.

“What do you mean *nothing* can harm it?”

“It’s indestructible. Once it has the holy tears on it there’s nothing that can harm it. It’s truly a miracle.”

“But, how do you really know?” I asked sincerely. “Have you tried to do anything to harm it? Have you ever tried to, say...tear it, for instance?” I inquired.

“No. But there are stories of cloth just like this one stopping bullets and curing cancer and all kinds of otherwise unexplainable things,” she told me. “Almost every villager there had a story to tell like that.”

“Do you mean to tell me that if I were, say, to try to burn that cloth right now that it simply wouldn’t burn?” I knew I

was getting into dangerous territory here, but being young, imprudent and thus engaged, I simply couldn't let such a claim pass. Besides, somewhere inside I really wanted it all to be true, for the cloth to be truly indestructible, for my Aunt Dee to really have a tangible basis for being as good as she had always proven herself to be. We all sat in quiet contemplation for a moment. Dee, who had been holding out the cloth all this time, now handed it over to me and I took it and felt it between my fingers. It was a act of trust on her part, I suppose. Of the cloth itself, I perceived nothing extraordinary. I then handed it to my sister who took it very gingerly, looked at it intently, first the one side, then the other, and then gently handed it back to Aunt Dee. I noted to myself that my sister and I handled Dee's cloth as if it were extremely fragile instead of the very essence of permanence it was purported to be.

"That's wonderful, Dee," my sister said with an over eager expression of approval, obviously humoring the old gal. I thought the controversy had safely passed, but Dee must have registered the tone of my sister's voice and a sudden gleam came into her eye. I thought I recognized it as that mischievous quality I suspected resided within her still. She fixed her gaze at me.

"Go ahead, Stevie, try to burn it," she blurted out. It was more a command than an offer.

“No! Dee, I couldn’t.” I noticed I was physically backing away from the table as I said this. “There is no way I’m going to burn up something you went all the way to Romania to get. Besides, you said it wouldn’t burn and if you believe it won’t, why shouldn’t I?”

“No, really, go ahead, I want you to. It won’t burn, you’ll see. Once the Madonna’s tears have touched it, it lost its worldly ability to be harmed. Don’t be afraid. I’m not.”

I looked at my sister. She gave me one of those “you’re on your own” looks. I looked back at Dee who was sitting there radiating the faith she felt in her heart and proclaimed with her words, holding the little square of cloth in the middle distance between us, offering it up as proof of her sincerity. I looked into Dee’s eyes, those trusting, loving eyes I would never intentionally hurt, and the cloth between us went slightly out of focus, becoming a visual blur against the reality of the clattering restaurant activity around us. My sense of what to do had also become a bit blurry.

“Dee, if I light this up and it burns, we’ll both feel terrible, so let’s just let it go, ok?” Now I was trying desperately to back out. Why must the rubber always meet the road, after all?

“It won’t burn Stevie, believe me. Go ahead, try to light it on fire. I want you to try.”

So, I took the cloth from my aunt with my left hand and held it out before me over the center of the table by one of its

corners so that it was suspended equidistantly between the three of us. The lighting in the room was rather dim and seemed to get even dimmer as I prepared to test my Aunt's faith as well as my judgement as a good nephew. I slowly reached into the breast pocket of my shirt with my right hand and took out my cigarette lighter. I held the lighter about a half an inch below the lowest corner of the sacred cloth and glanced once more at my aunt and then at my sister, who sat there kind of slack-jawed in disbelief that I was actually going to do such a thing. I was waiting to see if the bluff would be called. My sister's look became worried. My aunt looked supremely confident. No resistance was offered.

"You sure?" I asked one last time, raising my eyebrows to impart the significance of the question.

Aunt Dee nodded assuredly and said, "go ahead."

I flicked the striker on the lighter and the small bluish flame leapt from its maw. We all sat transfixed at the sight of the initial flame, all our attention focused as it was on the cloth, the flame, and the implication of what was to follow. For us, the outside world had for now ceased to exist and we were in a silent and secret circle of profound import.

For a split second the cloth hung suspended over the tip of the lighter's dancing flame and I'm quite sure that we were all hoping in that frozen moment of time that a true miracle might occur, for the lighter to go out by an unexplained gust of

air perhaps or, dare I even think it, for the cloth to simply not burn even as it was bathed in the high temperature plasma being applied and rising from directly beneath it. The heat of the man made flame met my aunt's tear soaked miracle cloth and suddenly, in a rather brief but unexpectedly bright burst of light, which made me draw my hands back and apart from each other instinctively, the little square of white cloth from Romania burst not only into flame, but sublimated completely out of existence leaving behind only a thin, twisting tendril of black residue floating in the space the cloth had previously occupied. The sound of our sudden and simultaneous inhalation of breath accompanied the burst of heat and light, and then, for what seemed a very long moment, there was utter silence among us. We watched the cooling residuum twist with a graceful agony on the prevailing currents until it had completely dissipated and was visible no longer.

I looked at my sister, whose eyes were extremely wide. As for myself, I felt extremely foolish, as I knew that the cloth would burn, I needn't have actually burned it to prove it to be so and yet I had, destroying my Aunt's expensively acquired prize souvenir and perhaps her faith as well, and for what? My sister and I both looked over at Aunt Dee, worried perhaps that she would be angry, hurt, or so disappointed that she would collapse on the spot, spiritually if not physically. She too had been watching the black remnant of her holy cloth as it floated

away. Then, with the same countenance of serenity born of faith fixed upon her wonderfully composed face, she gazed upon us both and said, with complete confidence and composure: "I guess Mary got the piece with the tears on it."

Poetry

This is a Battlefield My Dear

Teresa Bergman

"This is a battlefield my dear...
whatever are you doing here?"

*"I have come to walk among
the dying."*

"There are no dying here, you can see
I fight, I am strong."

*"Then let me offer a kiss to this
courageous soul."*

As the Lady in white bends down
the soldier offers his head for
this sweet blessing and vaguely notices
Her pristine gown
and wonders where She has been.

*"Fear not brave heart, I will
watch over the ones you love."*

He slowly raises his eyes to see
Her smiling face. The soft
outline of wings grace his sight and
a quiet "Thank you" escapes
his lips before the bullet
meets its mark.

Professors

Teresa Bergman

They all sit there so *knowing*,
So *sure* of themselves, and
So *refined*.

The lofty words they use
They do not know the feeling,
the meaning, if you will.

Vaulted above the likes of me
By their own powers
of divination.

They claim their haughty airs
are proof of their enlightenment,
Which should be taken
as the ends of truth.

"Do not discover your own,
only tell me what I
already know!", claim
the Truth Givers.

I will dash their claims of perfection
and unleash a seed of doubt.

Residual Requiem for Recurring Relinquished Relics

Louis Clausi

Now I think of them and they are only gone again.

I got the bubble, in the middle of my abdomen.

But things float up now and again, the bubbles almost full.

Possessions are no things to cling to but the memories ardently pull.

A sill full of sallow reflections.

Things that seemed dear to me.

They are hungry when they show up
and shuffle to the front for my memory.

Things I remember at such an early age,
the scatter of 45's, cards and drawings
around my room so oddly placed.

All those little things in having
where my character was shaped.

I remember the bike I had at the age of 15
to the zither and the citar I had hardly ever seen.

How easily things could get lost in the house of Dr. Pal.
although he was a Dr., I still can't find them now.

There were books, cassettes and clothing
Ideas and thoughts and friends
some things important, the list just never ends.

As time went on the things piled up
they threw me for a loop
Like that time I messed up that audition
for the Blue Man Group.
sometimes leaving scars
there were paintings, poems, animals and cars.
Then it came to musical things
like drums, that Roland Spd8, two banjos and the accordion,
Flutes, Guitars 4 tracks, and that freaking violin.
The 150 tapes that got stolen with music from my teens
Canes, Plants, Posters, with plenty in between.
More than those possessions are decisions of the past
I thought I got over the tormenting but
sometimes they just last.
But now I face the truth and I know that I don't mind
No use in regretting what now I will never find.
One day my energy will cease and I will no longer be
and the loss of my possessions could only set me free.
My mind does window-shopping
as I waltz through what I explore
and I know that if I were to obtain more things
I would only be inviting the potential of losing more.

Swingin' in the Tide

Maddy Adams

Through the pitfalls of time
losing a job, running missing the line.
Love at its worst
just lust a hormonal curse.

We are swingin' in the tide
by the Oceanside
cause nobody's life comes planned.

So some are rich
and some are damned
like me
in this world I see
no useful reason to be
just energy
that lives and dies
no matter how hard they cry.

So I think
before my ship sinks
how a man can change mortality
but doing this I drift farther from reality
cause it makes a man's mind hurt
to dream the nothingness of 6 feet in the dirt.

But wait,
why don't we create
a way to make
us immortal.

A cloning machine to give a time porthole
by making young bodies for our aged minds
'cause neurons can live long, so scientists find.

Creating in effect a human's gold years gold,
no arthritis, wrinkles, or hips easily broken.
Just a wise mind in the fresh flesh,
after this our brain power will be the test.
to see if we find new environments for our growing population
or curing cancer and world relations.

We are just swinging in the tide
so I find
living light—before dark
can it shine?

And make our little worlds forever
with a catchy slogan like "Die Never,"
for a futuristic company
in specialization of human cloning.
Selling hearts, and legs to those in need,
making perfect clones from a perfect seed.

But some say never disrespect
another man's dreams and intellect.
Someday, something may happen
and those in doubt, they'll be nappin'.
In a perfect world—God will save us all
but we need to think out this thing before we fall.

Alcohol's Proof

Erin Turner

With the shades pulled down and pain as captor,
emptiness echoed against the faint light
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Father's beer-stenched whip reminded of chores,
and suicide's noose became much too tight
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor.

The alcohol's proof equaled endless sores,
and the offspring struggled with a lost fight
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

In sober times, to his daughter he swore
that some day the family would unite
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor.

Exhausted from lies, she uttered no more,
prepared for the time when she would indict
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Just as she promised, she declared war
as bullets linked them that vengeful night
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Pillow Talk

Leslie Claus

You woke up that morning
and said, "I have to go now...
(you had an epiphany)
for the last twenty years
I've lived someone else's life."
You weren't kidding.
And you left
your shirts and pants
hanging in the closet
with your shoes lined up
waiting for you to choose
which ones you'd walk out with.

I woke up the next morning
and said, "Now what" to your pillow.
the indentation of your head
still visible.

First I rearrange the furniture
and put pictures face down on closet shelves
to be dealt with another day

and smoke five cigarettes for every cup of coffee.
That night I play pool by myself with your favorite cue
singing I Will Always Love You
in my best Dolly Parton voice
and drink a whole pitcher of martinis
called Sacred Truth
hoping that I might actually discover it.

Candy

Sasha McBrayer

She walks by and smiles like we're old friends

Candy

"Did I speak to you?"

Am I so beneath her that she would not remember a conversation with me?

Candy

I shake my head in the negative

I think to myself that she's confused

Candy

She offers me a bright orange square of paper

Candy

Now I see... She wants me to vote her queen

Candy

This is my name, this is my face, this is me being pleasant to you

These are my eyes covered in make-up

Here is my name and where you will find it on the ballot

Candy

"OK," I say with a smile

Knowing you would never vote for me

Knowing that should you win, you'd become queen of

... Nothing

Candy

"Oh yes, would you like a piece of candy?"

"Sure . . ."

Candy. . .

I have no desire to walk to the polling place

I have already forgotten your face

All I remember

Is a piece of candy

In my pocket.

The Game

Sasha McBrayer

Everything was a game
And the game was everything
There was nothing outside the game's realm
And winning was as important as breathing
Your whole body served your will
And your will was golden and forceful
There was no overreacting
For the game was life itself
You took yourself seriously
And switched sides
If it meant you'd survive
There were weapons
And there were hiding places
Some days we ran forever
And hid so hard our bodies became fatigued
Anticipation fluttered in your stomach
And it made you want to scream out with singing laughter
The enemy could be as twisted and as cruel as your nightmares
You'd do anything not to get caught
You'd use any excuse to run
But eventually the sky got dark
And mom called you in for supper
You'd play another game of war
Tomorrow.

Gorgon

Chris Burchette

Medusa shedding,
“old habits die hard”
skin after skin, layer after layer. Sometimes those snakes grow back
a concept stolen from Lazarus. Medusa laughs at the concept of a Christian
myth,
her eyes green with envy and contempt.

Sometimes in her cavern of ivory she dares to gaze at her reflection,
Her greatest fear is herself,
The Midas touch. But did Midas ever turn himself into gold?
She studies herself,
blood dripping from a jagged scalp, hair stained crimson,
a root of torn snake poking from the mesh of skin and scales. Her beauty
returns but as the legend goes sometimes those snakes grow back.

Medusa frightening,
“old habits die hard”
rumors beget curiosity,
curiosity begets stone,
stone people never talk,
they just listen.

Mariah and her Fancy Red Scarf

Ryan Clark

My favorite time of the year is when I
 See the scarves floating
 Above my head, like a moth
Last Thursday, flapping in circles,
 Trying to escape the cold,
Lying between Harris and Macon
 In a backyard garden,
 Holding the scarves
For my wintertime wonder in red;
 I chase them and dance,
 Swinging arms, jumping,
 Oozing peppers, broken squash;
 From a bag on Broughton
For coffee and a cheesecake muffin;
 Candy-apple red, frayed and fancy,
 For my live-in lady friend

If I were Set with Wings Ample Enough to Fly

Louis Clausi

Zeus held his hands high
with the stealth of an anvil set by his side.
Pressed opaque behind his shoulder,
diligent spread of thought
tracing hands stretched
to reach for a mushroom cloud
without the reverberation.
Intent to fly as I am flying.
Lofty sojourn, out in the open with the elements,
a bit more of a breeze in my hair.
The sounds in my head, soft like a pan of cotton.
Cupid's soft hearth of cirrus held straight to ice skate
behind the faces of Dali, Davis, Dunn, Pastorius,
Beethoven, Sunshine, Fonseco, Teller, Gandhi, and Bugs Bunny.
I want to fly along side Super-Man,
along side Wonder Woman,
along side a carrier pigeon.
I want to catch the glare of Wonder Woman's wristbands,
let my eyes graze on the sunshine you can see peering through her
invisible jet.
It will prevent the breeze through my hair
but at least I can still see the air below me.
Behind the breaks of jet trails, soft hugs, the Michelin Man,
boomerangs, butterflies, children diving for balls,
women balancing baskets, dog's ears, flying back,
sitting in a teacup, and turtles upside down.
Me waving, turning, sitting, flying,
the land below me in an assimilated city haze,
sun across the cabin,
chills on my toes within every cloud.
Its own slope,
wings,
glazed back in the softest hope,
still for moments.
In the air,
waning while I fly.
At your hip I turn, like a whale on helium wings.
Lifted like the elements we breathe and a rabbit's run.
I fly.

Metals Sent from Greece to America

Eric Verhine

"listen to the rest of the story. 'All of you in the city are brothers,' we'll say to them in telling our story, 'but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers And other craftsmen.'"

From Plato's *Republic*

I, being born silver, attend a near
and meager college, for which mom and dad,
likewise silver, disburse their assets dear,
to pattern me into a bourgeois lad.

While walking to the car, after my class,
I pass the bronze men, toiling at their sites -
The proles - who never gave no dead rat's ass
'bout Smith's or Marx's fiscal insights.

Once home, we beaten bronze and silver knaves
do much the same: we couch our selves and watch
the shadows live on walls within our caves,
reflections dark of gold folk without blotch.

And yet, when you read Plato's famous lie
and chide those false inequities, you sigh.

The Breaking Point

Erin Turner

Blindly I begin my studies from a purity burning within,
restlessly waiting to execute that fateful fire of wild desires
distancing me from the always annoying educator of grammar rules
and formulas, catapulting the start of my college career toward catastrophe
marked first by the drink and then by the pill and then the crushed pill to make its way
up the canal of my nose polluting my brain in a speedier fashion as I had no time to waste
since descending to undiscovered depths required that posthaste method, and once subordinated
I could only look up from the pit I had hallowed, and with eyes upward, I could evade incoming
so I sought to extinguish the yearning fire of Vogel's dependent heart, and I unearthed
the kindling for a fire in the head, so Tess and Ligeia became oxygen for the flames
in my mind while my souvenir singed heart seared my youth out of necessity
to spark my impending end, which was never meant to be figures of grams,
ounces, and quarters, but rather a rhyme, meter, rhythm, and form; therefore,
I sharply continue my studies from a scorched site so to better see,
not from my crouched position in that burning shelter as before
but rather from the blackened spot where I now stand.

Meditations from a Mountain

Ryan Clark

I climbed from the depths of sorrow
Whose clambering chains grappled my soul.
Once enveloped in the depths, I sought refuge in the
Ageless sun.

I looked from the mountains of salvation
Whose authenticity I questioned with fervor.
Twice upon the mountains I sought refuge from the
Ageless sun.

I drank from the waters of purity
Whose clarity saturated my thoughts.
Thrice swam the ripples, I sought refuge with the
Ageless sun.

Now, I lie as a stone gleaming the reflection
Whose wisdom and beauty I sought.
I look upon the ageless sun and, alas,
I can look no more.

Untitled

Donald Stapleton

Dream,
awake to pain.
Walk to the shadowy
ashes that reveal
nothing.
Drops of liquid
from my hand,
not Blood,
not Red,
bleak, like the color of
soul.
Cry, cry out to
the night.
Search for Halos
that shall not hear.
Tears fall on dreams
unanswered.

Protestantism

by: Eric Verhine

After huddling for refuge into the cowl and cloister,
The first twelve months when the Devil remained peaceable,
The daily prayers seven times over and the assiduous meditation,
After first saying the mass when the Infinite
With a Holy, Ogerish Face seized his spiritual shoulders
And shook him to bony, bloody, grated knees
In righteous fear and hallowed trembling,
After the strenuous sojourn to the Eternal City
— HAIL. HOLY ROME! —

A month of venerating shrines and bones and holy relics,
Of appropriating all the spiritual resources and bargains
That the Eternal City could offer his beleaguered soul.
And after ceaselessly shedding emaciated tears
Over and over and over the Hebrew and the Greek,
And beating importunately on his dear apostle Paul,
Martin Luther refound the Faith, and God.

and as if you,
american pastor,
comport with God.
you, who've never
shook when flipping
open your Bible.
you, who've never
trembled while
passing around
the Lord's Supper,
the wee plastic
cups half-full
of grape juice,
the bite-sized
wafers.
you, who request
a "love offering"
for spending cash
on your vacation
to Cancun.
you, who read your
Bibles in English.

Trick from the Hat

Maddy Adams

And the burning Bush
said to the setting sun,
“I hope around you come.”

And the Arab Prince
with a trillion cents
was mad at the other world.

And the time ensued
and the armies brood
marching around the world.

And they burnt their flags
and wound their rags
around a burning fool.

And all between
and all who see
struck for ever more.

Jihad they cry
to the burning sky
I hope the end will come.

And for pride they cry
for all that die
God Bless America.

And all between
and all that see
struck for ever more.

Roman candles
and bottle rockets,
proud soldiers
and those in office.
Nobody cares to
and nobody wants to
stop it.
But yet someone
knocks on the door.
Peace ringing the bell.
A dove flies by the window
and the war burns in hell.

But yet someone
knocks on the door.
Peace is ringing the bell.
Put away all your weapons
tear down this evil spell.

Love is knocking at the door.
Why don't you step right in?
Lead us through the dull,
show us where to begin.

Life can come to you only if you try harder than that.
Love will come to you for things smaller than that.
Peace is the only way you can pull the trick from the hat.

Relative Individuality

Eric Verhine

Trained mom and trained dad train Timmy.

Trained mom speaks and points

until Timmy speaks their speech and gets their point.

Trained mom speaks and points, "duck."

Timmy gets the point and speaks their speech.

Then Timmy sees a chicken.

Timmy speaks and points, "duck."

Trained mom knows Timmy did not get the point.

Trained mom speaks and points, "chicken."

Timmy gets the point and speaks their speech.

Trained dad acts in front of Timmy.

Trained dad does the acts and points

until Timmy acts their acts and gets their point.

Trained dad pees in the "pot."

Timmy pees in the "pot."

Then Timmy pees on the grass.

Trained dad knows Timmy did not get the point.

Trained dad whacks Timmy.

Timmy gets the point and pees in the "pot."

Trained teacher trains Timmy.

Trained teacher trains Timmy to write.

Trained teacher writes writing on the board.

Trained teacher writes and points

until Timmy writes their writing and gets their point.

Timmy writes their writing.

“Write their writing right, write their writing right...”

Trained teacher trains Timmy to calculate.

Trained teacher calculates a calculation on the board.

Trained teacher calculates and points

until Timmy calculates their calculation and
gets their point.

Trained teacher trains Timmy to read.

Now Tim can learn their learning.

Thereafter, Timothy's instruction serves, as it were,
as a trellis to which the vines of his
dubieties and certainties adhere,
or, to transmogrify the metaphor,
as a rostrum on which Timothy ambulates,
while he carps about challenging authority and
affirming individuality.

Bald Mountain Maine, July 17 2001

Emily Joost

We herded children up the trail, teaching them to look for the white Xs on trunks marking the way to the top. We dutifully told them about not littering and staying hydrated and observing but not touching. We tried to instill respect for this vastness in 15 eight-year-olds. We hushed their chatter and taught them to listen to birds and see squirrels. We said leading was not the most important but being there was what mattered.

Up we went telling them the view would be worth the work. We continued to talk and explain and answer as we rounded the edge of the mountain but when we reached the top, we drew in a breath and realized in a glance that words didn't matter. At that moment we all understood.

Spider

Amy Limpert

Your eyes simulated my gaze,
as I was seduced by enticing illusions -
never feeling your deadly kiss.
Falling into powerless confinement,
trapped as a victim in your web,
in which there seemed no escape.
As you toyed with the notion of consumption,
your prey was left to question its fate.
Drained to the point of lethargy,
my narcotic slumber nearly submitted to an enslaving eternity.
This malignance is your definition of love.
My lips will forever taste your poison.

Mother

Amy Limpert

Mother and child, and unbreakable bond.
One acts as protector, shielding away evil,
proudly watching the life her precious creation unfolds.
The other breathes in life, tackling it with invincibility,
knowing if any danger occurs, her hand will catch the fall.
The initial connection that sustains a lifetime.
Immortality is each other's unspoken dream,
broken as one becomes inflicted with a terminal disease.
The roles begin to change,
the two assume unfamiliar parts.
Tears lessen the pain in their hearts,
clinging to one another, thinking of wasted years.
Always hopeful for another moment, unsure how it will end.
Believe that God hears one's prayers.

Phys. Ed.

Jeremy Windus

Behold this shattered scream,
A vivid scene of scraps:

Here and there a disc is thrown
A stick swung, a whistle blown
In this Hall of false parquet, woefully dull and tragic.
Proud banners emblazon walls,
Retelling conquests and falls.

A little boy cannot climb the ropes.
Instructor aloofly conducts each harried, hurried young child.
Brilliant keys jingle on his belt.

The little boy weeps at the ropes.

Tears that burn hot; hot like rage.
Surging down sad marble cheeks.
The hall erupts in full
Pompeii grandstands of laughter.

The little boy flees from the ropes.
From this moment, this soul-crushing crime,
Beneath a life long-drenched deep in grime.
Burning gently at the back of his throat.
Holding ages of dread within Charon's boat,
Armed with Shiva and an old Celtic Ghost,
Come hot from hell now to fulfill Ulysses' boast,
A mark of shame emblazoned on his chest,
Eyeing the dove's tail once used as a crest,
To collect a promise made / A debt unpaid,
Exacted now through a pound of flesh.

The little boy returns to the ropes.

Thus, as the boy steps forth in this state-
Unnoticed 'till now, unpicked 'till this date-
Ready to swing, ready to kick.
See his face?
Is he sick?

No.

I want to breathe smoke.

i wish.

Vicky Smith

when the whole world sleeps
and the night is vast and empty
as i sit on the front porch,
swinging slowly-
hinges creaking in the dim silence,
bare feet brushing against the cold concrete,
looking out into a cold, alien world:
a solitary being vying for existence
with the blank, faraway glow of the stars-
i watch the embers
at the end of my cigarette
struggling not to fade
into the opaque nonexistence
of a small fire dying in the night-
tendrils of smoke, twisting,
gray and vague,
disintegrating into the crisp air
and forgotten-
unknown except by these blood shot
tired, straining eyes;
and as the last tiny red glow
flickers into oblivion
i wish -
on those stars i always lose against-
that i could believe in you.

time warped letters set in stone

Vicky Smith

Someone tell me how we return to the times of innocence-
back when we were self-assured prophets instead of burn-outs or enemies;
back when forever still stood a chance in hell;
back before we raped the "could-be" until its headstone read "should-have"
in time warped letters set in stone.

I blundered into you and it was the sweetest accident I ever made.
Someone tell me how to get back to that time of chance collision,
someone tell me how to freeze it,
someone tell me how to let us --then know how precious those moments are
before the time perversion.

My clock just chimed "too late" and I have no where to go
in this broad valley of wrecked and burned bridges.

Someone tell me how we return to the times of innocence.

I remember

by: Vicky Smith

the poverty, the sadness.

and how pretty it was. the sunlight through the window on the
burdened wooden floor.

velma crying naked on the toilet as i washed her triangular child-
breasts with a dirty white cloth

the old woman sitting alone in the kitchen, watching her aching knees
swell

in the miasma of heat and rotting food, yelling -thank you sweet
jesus-

as velma screamed and sweat dripped into my eyes

the dust mites wandering in the shafts of light leaking into the de-
spair-darkness

-from outside

where velma might have been normal

and no white stranger would ever

have to see her naked and

force dirty washrags on her

a quiet (still) day

Vicky Smith

it was a quiet (still) day-
that painful-poised feel
of a liquid-glass droplet
clinging to air and
stainless steel
justabout to
but not quite
yet fall

a cat's *aboutto* jump

day
with the sky all
wound up
a
bam!
blatant blue
hurled
between
bunched up clouds
readyto-

a

condensed no
water added saturday and
i smoked more than usual
went to work and

nothing
happened

to justify
the tense blue hue
of the
sky-about-to-spring

and it was (still)
just a quiet day
blue and then black and
“tomorrow, then.”
was foggy
and
gray.

the insomniac's play

Vicky Smith

eerie fluorescent light spills from the moon
casting shadows on the paper houses
i stand on a vast stage
with all four corners of eternity
and all the creatures that lurk in their shadows
at my outstretched fingertips-

every leaf is a shadow puppet,
thespians in absurdity theater: the wind-
the cardboard trees don't quite pull off the
the illusion of depth
and every blade of grass is distinct,
cutting the scenery from its low horizon-
the world is breathing on this quiet stage
and i, the actor and the audience,
breathe with it

beneath the expanse of stars caught in still frame
i fold my hands behind my back
for i am afraid to touch something so unreal
and to reach towards unknown lands
behind that building stark against its black background
and i am afraid
that were i to touch it, to reach out
i would discover my self unreal
in the early morning hour of the insomniac's play.

epiphany while scrubbing the toilet

Vicky Smith

I noticed
as I was bent over the toilet,
scrubbing with
a beer in my hand,
shirtless with
my tits all over the place
(and the cat staring
from the corner)
that when I flushed the toilet
the lights flickered-

and when
the window unit a/c comes on
the lights flicker

and when i turn on the vacuum
the lights flicker

and, it seems
every fuckin day
it grows a little darker in here

flickering like bitter christmas tree lights
verging on mutiny:
everything dragging shadows, tugging
in the dark

and I realized, one day,
I'll lift my left pinky
and it will all go black

and, if the cat or I
notice that the light
finally threw its arms
up in despair
and made a final exit-

I seriously doubt, by that point,
that either of us will give a damn.

recipe for a lesson in pursuit of tomorrow

Vicky Smith

take a handful of residual sun gilded memories.
wash in silence and late-night tears.
submerge in never-can never-will dreams
born of cigarette smoke, haunting music
and neurotic pacing.
add a razor sharp sliver of hope
reflected in the eyes
of the drawn pale face
hovering in the side view mirror
on that random drive.
stir to a vaporous sludge of unreality.
sprinkle with bitterness,
bake at 750 degrees on high cynicism,
ice with irony and rage.
eat alone in a house echoing
with the shadows of cries.
swallow despite the lump
in your throat.
sleep.
dream.
wake to an elusive tomorrow
that never seems to come,
energized by the remnants
of what he couldn't take
hanging heavy in your bowels.
remember the taste of a lesson
as you continue through
the varying shades and hues and textures
of existence,
chasing tomorrow towards
a self made destiny.

Art



Naive Knew Better

Sebastian Phillip - Photo



Ocean

Amy Limpert - Digital



Behold Your Life
Jeremy Windus - Photo



Pause

Emily Joost - Photo



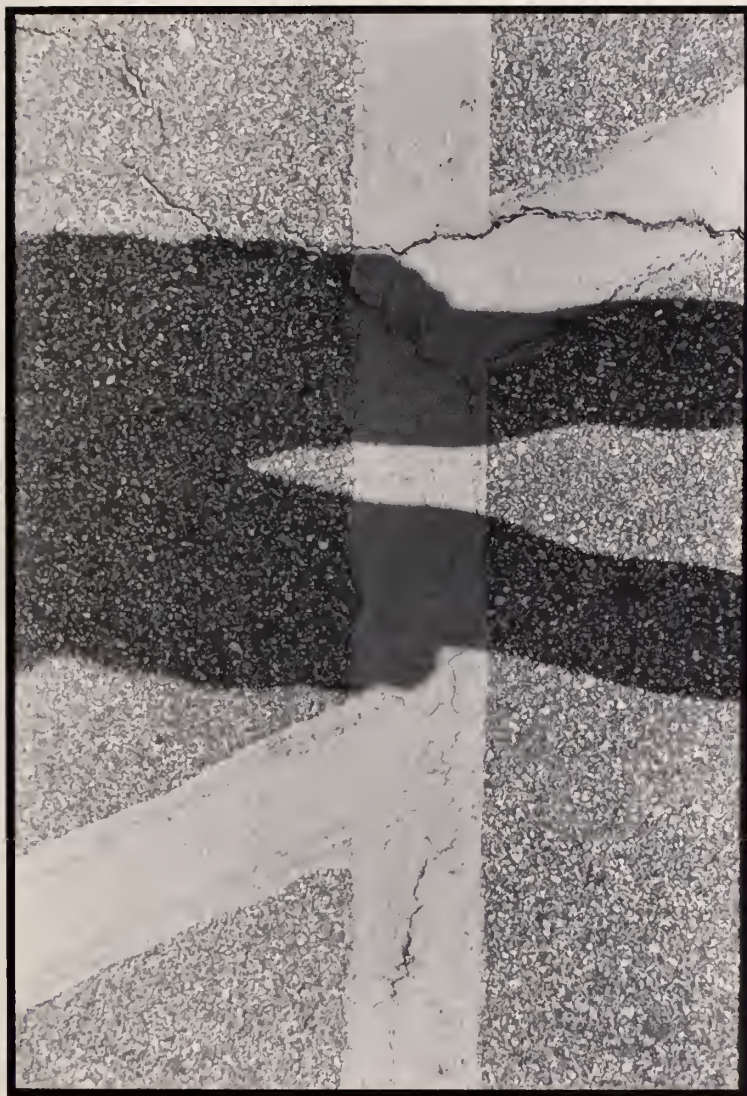
Gladys, Deana and the Next

Onica Kitchens - Oil



Hell-Surfer

Jane Boswell



Untitled

Bil Leidersdorf - Photo



Shadow to Man

Chris Dunn - Acrylic



Solitude

Jarrett Walsh - Photo



Fado; Lisboa

Julian Santa-Rita - Acrylic

Earshot

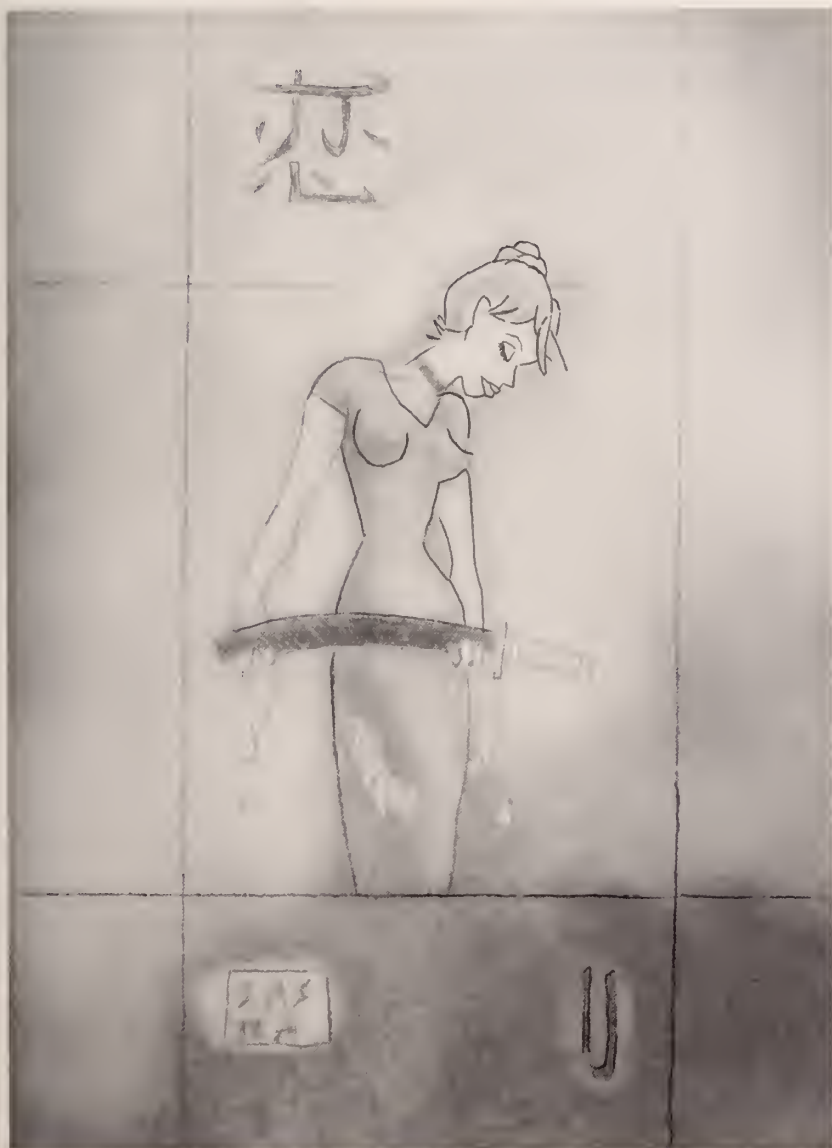
Sebastian Phillip -Solar Plate





Bad Bunny

Sasha McBrayer - Photo



“Samurai: Duty Before Love”

Sasha McBrayer - Print



Untitled

Jamie Stone - Acrylic



Homeward

Jeremy Windus - Photo



Shades of the Past #3

Onica Kitchens - Graphite on Terracotta



